

The Morning After by **TheMikeWheelers** (jasongracefully)

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Summary:

The morning after closing the gate, Mike and Eleven just really want some time together. Also some cuddling.

The Morning After

Mike woke up next to Eleven many times in his life. Between all the days they fell asleep while cuddling in their teens, and then as adults, laying in each other's arms every night, he loved the feeling of his first thought in the morning to be of her. But none of those times would ever compare to the fluttering Mike felt in his chest the first time he saw her in a post-sleep daze.

He didn't think he dreamt the night before. If he had, he didn't remember any of it. He woke up with a throbbing headache and his whole brain feeling fuzzy. His mind hadn't yet turned on enough for him to remember any dreams or anything from the night before, all he could process was the cool November air and the blanket wrapped around him.

If he had been thinking more clearly, the blanket probably would have been his last concern, but in his hazy, sleep-ridden state, he just wanted to bury his face down and wrap himself tighter in the blanket until he drifted back to the land of blissful sleep.

He groaned while rolling onto his side. His face found some soft surface to bury itself into and he accepted it. Whatever it was wasn't the most comfortable thing, wisps of it nudging into his nose and making him feel like he was about to sneeze, and if he wasn't so dazed and sleepy he would have investigated what this surface was, but for now he settled on reaching his arm out of the warmth of the blanket to push it away.

He didn't, however, except the thing to respond back to him. It let out a groan itself, whining his name, and Mike's consciousness finally set in.

Eleven.

The morning daze washed away as Mike's eyes opened and he took in the sight next to him, the memories of the day before flooding his brain. Waking up in the lab, the Mind Flayer possessing Will, Eleven coming home, Bob dying, Billy showing up, Eleven coming home, going to the tunnels, closing the gate, Eleven coming home, Eleven

coming home, Eleven...

She was there. It didn't feel real in the moment, the sleepiness of his brain making it feel like it must have all been his imagination, but Mike could remember everything so clearly. All that had really happened yesterday. She was really home.

Her eyes were only half-open, obviously sleepy herself, but Mike didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful sight before in his life. Nothing could compare to the way she radiated, barely even awake yet still holding him captivated.

When El had left the night before, his heart felt like it was going to burst. She had just come home and she was already leaving him again, he didn't know how he was going to handle it if she didn't come back again. And when the lights from Billy's car lit up at the tunnels, Mike didn't know whether El had just saved them all, or sacrificed herself. Waiting back at the Byers' was hell. He'd gone through 353 days without her, but somehow that last hour, racked with fear and confusion and uncertainty, was the worst. He was pacing the living room when the lights from Hop's truck lit up the house, and the boys ran outside to find their victorious friend leaning onto Hopper as she walked up the porch.

Mike hugged her tighter than he'd ever hugged anyone in his life.

The next hour was spent between the kids swapping stories from the last few days in the kitchen. Mike refused to leave El's side until Joyce declared everyone had to shower. She asked Jonathan and Will to find some clean clothes for everybody to wear, and they took turns using the single bathroom in the house.

El was the last person to use the shower. When she had finished, Joyce told her she could sleep in Will's room that night, as he was staying in her bed. Except when El was heading into the room, she tugged Mike to come with her. He didn't argue. He didn't *want* to argue. Everyone was too exhausted to question it, and El waited until the door was closed before pulling Mike into her, burying her face into his chest. They hadn't had a real moment alone yet, and this was their first chance to say everything they needed to without eyes from their friends and families watching on.

The rest of the night was spent between the two of them whispering into the dark. At some point they had retreated to the bed. They were sharing a pillow, and El had her hand cradling Mike's cheek while his arms were wrapped around her back pulling her closer. They spent the night whispering tender confessions and declarations of how much they had missed each other, and Mike fell asleep with her face buried in his chest. He could smell the vanilla-scented shampoo she had used, and her wet hair was dampening the T-shirt he'd borrowed from Jonathan.

Now, Mike's eyes felt to her hair, the culprit for what he had just buried his face into, and he couldn't take his gaze off it. It was *curly*. He didn't know what he expected it to look like once it dried, but he was captivated by the ringlets circling her head like a halo.

He couldn't help himself from reaching out to touch one. He cradled her cheek with his hand, his fingers reaching out to twirl her curls. El leaned into his palm, letting out a content groan. Mike smirked at her wordless communication, supposing she wasn't too talkative in the morning.

"Sorry," Mike breathed, "It's just your hair." He twirled the strands around his fingers a few more times and gulped, "It's really pretty."

El didn't say anything, instead grinning at him, and oh God, *her dimples*, Mike felt like he couldn't breathe. He swore he could even see the faintest pink tint on her cheeks.

She bumped their foreheads together before stretching out lazily, like a cat in a sunbeam, and burying herself deeper into Mike's chest. Her head was directly on his heart, and Mike prayed she couldn't hear how fast it was beating.

"You're warm," El mumbled into his chest, snuggling closer.

He couldn't contain the grin that plastered over his whole face. It was silly really, *obviously* he was warm, and if El was cold, he was a direct source of body heat right next to her. Cuddling in to him was the logical thing to do, but no amount of reasoning could ward off the swarm of butterflies that erupted in his stomach at her words.

He wrapped the blanket around her and pulled her closer. His hand laid on her back, drawing circles between her shoulder blades as he smiled into her hair. He began to notice how much shorter she was than him; her head was resting on his chest, but their feet were still right next to each other, tangled up together and occasionally rubbing against each other.

Mike wanted to lie there forever. It could just be him and El, lying together and wrapped up in a warm blanket, for the rest of his life, and Mike would be perfectly happy.

But unfortunately, all good things must come to an end, because only a few minutes later, Mike felt a mounting pressure against his bladder he knew he couldn't ignore.

"El." He nudged her arm, "El, El." When she didn't respond, he briefly wondered if she had fallen back asleep. He tried slipping away from her carefully, but she groaned to alert him she was still awake.

"Mike," she whined, "Don't go."

Just the sound of her voice was almost enough for Mike to give in and lie back down and never let her out of his arms, but this wasn't an issue he could ignore forever, "I'm just going to the bathroom, I'll be right back." He debated leaning down to kiss her forehead as he said it, but in the moment couldn't find the courage to do it.

"Please? Just five more minutes?" She looked up at him with those puppy-dog eyes he hadn't seen in a year, and Mike knew she had him wrapped around her finger. He collapsed back down onto the bed, and El wiggled up so she was eye level with him. She was smirking, and Mike knew she was just as aware of her hold on him.

In future years, Mike would learn that this would be a recurring phenomenon throughout his whole adult life. He had always been a morning person, but El would much rather lie in bed all day. It would take years for him to learn to resist her puppy-dog eyes and pleas for a few more minutes of rest and cuddling. But for now, he was perfectly happy lying back down next to her and pulling her closer. His bladder could wait.

She was smiling, bumping their noses together and nuzzling her face into his cheek. "Hey."

"Hi." He wrapped his arm back around her, "Good morning."

"It's a very good morning."

"Is it?"

"Mhmm," she hummed, then reached behind her to take Mike's hand off her back. For a second Mike was scared he had crossed a line, but then she interlaced their fingers together, and brought his hand up so she could kiss his knuckles, and he was sure he was about to explode.

It was a very good morning. Mike wasn't about to debate that.

"I like waking up next to you," she continued, her lips moving over the back of his hand.

"Me too," he countered, "You're really comfy."

Instead of responding, El let out a content sigh, and she stretched over the bed once again, pulling Mike's hand along with her. When she finished she let it rest between their bodies, and closed her eyes. She buried her face into Mike's neck, and he took it she was ready to drift off again.

Twenty-four hours ago, Mike felt like he was descending into hell, but now he knew there could be no better heaven than having this amazing girl in his arms. The two laid there in silence, breathing in each other's presence. Mike pulled the blanket around them again to shelter them from the November chill, and he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

After a year of separation, every bit of El was intoxicating. From her vanilla-scented shampoo, to the way her hand was tightening its grip on his, to the way her curls cushioned his face when she leaned down, Mike couldn't get enough of her. It was ironic; every day she was gone, he had obsessed over all the things he never got a chance to tell her, but now that she was here in his arms, her breath on his neck and her heartbeat slowing, Mike knew he had time. For now he was perfectly content just being next to her, and taking in every

detail about her once again.

His focus was interrupted when El rolled over, now on her back instead of facing him. "I like this bed," she groaned, "It's a lot more comfortable than my bed at home."

Mike's brain got caught on that word "home." He kept forgetting that El had a home of her own now, she wasn't the nomad he once knew, hiding in his basement because she needed any place to crash. She had her own little house now, somewhere out in the middle of the same woods he met her in. She even had her own family, if you could call it that. Mike wasn't exactly sure what her relationship was with Hopper, but he wasn't ready to ask her yet.

El seemed to have been reading his mind, because she continued, "You should visit the cabin sometime. It's small, but it's nice. You'll like it."

"I'd love to see it." El had no clue how much he wanted that. It had been eating away at him since the night before that El really was under his nose this whole time, hidden away in the same woods he past all the time when biking to Will's house. He wanted nothing else than being able to see the home El had made for herself, the place she'd been hiding away for almost a year.

Silence broke between the two again, but this time Mike's mind was squirming, desperate to process all he'd learned about El over the last twelve hours.

"So," he gulped, "You've really been with Hopper this whole time?"

El looked down, "Well, I was in the woods for a little while, but.... yes." Her eyes darted around as she said it, and her voice was uneasy. Eventually she conceded to meet his eyes, and Mike gathered from her vulnerable expression that she was thinking about the night before, with him pulling Hop aside to scream at him for hiding her. She didn't want him to get upset again.

"No, no, El," Mike sighed, not sure how to word his confusion, "I'm just surprised, that's all. Not angry."

“Surprised?”

“It’s means to be shocked that something hap—”

“I know what ‘surprised’ means, Mike,” she interrupted.

Mike felt all the blood rush to his cheeks, “Oh. I’m sorry, I just, I just assumed—” He stopped himself from rambling on when he saw El was giggling at his embarrassment. Normally that would make him more sheepish, but the sight of El laughing couldn’t help but make him grin as well.

She leaned over, cupping his cheek in her hand, and smiled, “It’s okay. Why are you surprised?”

Mike felt his cheeks pinken up again, “I don’t know. It’s stupid.” El raised her eyebrows and he knew he wasn’t getting out of answering her question, “I’ve just known Hopper for years, and I never expected him to be the kind of guy to take you in. And my parents told me all these rumors about him, after his daughter died and he moved here.”

“Sara,” El interjected.

“Sara?”

“His daughter. Her name was Sara.”

“Oh,” Mike conceded, and silence fell over the room again. He wasn’t sure how to follow that, and El was looking on at him inquisitively.

After a few moments of quiet, she spoke up, “He’s good. Really good. We argued a lot, but... he just wanted to keep me safe.” El couldn’t deny she still harbored a little bit of anger, especially now that she was back with Mike, it devastated her how much time she had missed with him. But after that car ride to the lab the night before, she was ready to let that anger go. Things with Hopper may be messy, but she’d grown to care for him so much, and she knew he felt the same about her, and only ever wanted what was best for her. “He teaches me and helps me and he takes care of me. He’s really good, Mike.”

It dawned on Mike that she meant this as an offering, as her way to try and convince him to let go of any anger he held onto himself and

not to hate Hopper's guts after everything that had happened. Mike knew that the remains of a year's worth of avoidable pain and grief wasn't about to evaporate overnight, but for El, he was willing to try. It made his heart speed up to know she had someone she cared about, someone she really wanted him to like.

"I'm glad." He squeezed her hand, "You deserve the best."

"I already have the best," she smiled, "I have you."

If it was possible for Mike's heart to gush more for her in that moment, it did. He had no clue whether she was saying that with sincerity or as a way to flirt, but either way, it made his chest swell with adoration for her. She was giggling, a full toothy grin he didn't get to see much, and he knew he'd never get over seeing her that happy.

He rolled over to face her better, but the new position wasn't helping the pressure on his bladder. *Stupid bladder*, Mike thought. He didn't want to get up, he didn't want to be away from El even for a second, especially when she was laying there cuddling him.

"El I really I have to get up now."

She groaned, obviously equally displeased that he had to leave her, even if it was for just a few minutes to pee, "Okay, but come back," she whined, "Don't leave me." A whiff of food was coming through the door. Someone had make breakfast and they were bound to come get Mike and El up eventually, and El wanted as much time with him as possible before then.

Mike hesitated before responding. He knew what El meant by that, she was just saying to come back to her when he was done, but he couldn't stop himself before the words were out of his mouth, "I'd never leave you."

Blood rushed to his cheeks as soon as it slipped out. It was El's turn to be tongue-tied, and she was sporting a faint pink blush herself as she grinned at his declaration.

"I know you wouldn't. I won't either." She whispered. She looked at

Mike only for his gaze to drop upon her words, so she corrected herself, “Not again. I won’t ever leave you again.”

It’s not like she had much of a choice leaving him the last time. She had to do it, to save him, to save her friends, to save the world. But even if the universe insisted on tearing them apart, she’d always be fighting to find her way back to him. She was sure of that, and she hoped he knew it too.

Mike looked back up at her, and their gaze held. It struck Mike how close he was to her, their foreheads were bumping, and when her eyes fell down to his lips, it made his heart beat twice as fast to know she had the same idea. He leaned in slowly, and she met him halfway, her soft lips sending a jolt of electricity through his whole body.

It was 100 times better than their first kiss. Maybe it was the anticipation, maybe it was the lack of best friends in the background screaming about chocolate pudding, maybe it was just the fact that, opposed to a year ago, Mike was totally sure of his feelings for her now, and he knew she felt the same way, and that made the emotions behind this kiss all the stronger. Maybe it was a whole mix of reasons, but after this, Mike knew he’d never want to stop kissing her.

When he pulled away, the look on El’s face alone was enough to make him want to kiss her again. Her eyes were closed, with her lips slightly parted, and she looked like she couldn’t breath. Mike didn’t know if he looked the same, but he certainly felt it. But then she opened her eyes and smiled, and Mike was sure this was heaven. One of the demodogs must have killed him the night before and now he’s residing here in his own personal paradise.

El giggled and squeezed his hand, “Come back soon,” she whined. If Mike wasn’t still in shock from that kiss, her plea would have been enough to make him run across the house and set the world record for shortest amount of time to pee.

After a few moments of staring at her speechless, Mike knew he had to do something other than stare at her like an awestruck idiot, so he did the one thing he wanted to do. He kissed her again. He dove

down to catch her lips once more, a quick peck that ended as fast as it started, and she giggled against his mouth. He would have kept kissing her too, if it wasn't for the dire pressure on his bladder signaling him to hurry up.

Mike got up and walked to the bathroom, suddenly very aware of his acute morning breath. If El had noticed, she hadn't seemed to care, but he hoped the Byers had an extra toothbrush he could use, because he was sure he wanted to do *that* again.